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ABSTRACT

When people experience failures they search for an explanation of why the failure occurred. The process of seeking an explanatory cause is the basis of attribution theory. Causal attributions include the dimensions of locus of causality (internal or external), stability of the cause over time, and the degree of personal control over the outcome. These variations reflect self-concept, i.e., a person's perception of him/herself as formed through experience with the environment and the interpretation of such experiences. In failure events, internal locus (recognizing oneself as the cause of events) has been associated with low self-esteem. However, if meaningful others also fail, the cause of failure is perceived as outside of oneself (external locus). Stability is related to self-concept since successive failures result in ever increasing attributions of lack of ability (an internal, stable cause) accompanied by ever decreasing self-concept; but if failure is attributed to a stable but external cause, self-concept does not necessarily decrease. Thus, failure itself is not sufficient for learned helplessness; one must also perceive him/herself as the locus of causality. A perceived lack of control over a failure event would theoretically help maintain self-esteem; however, research indicates that successive though uncontrollable failure still leads to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. (WAS)

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Running Head: Attributions and Self-Concept

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Abstract

When people experience failures they search for an explanation of why the failure occured. The process of seeking the explanatory cause for failures is best captured in Attribution Theory. It seems logical, and is indeed relevant, to consider the relationship between causal attributions and self-concept. Literature on the topic of self-esteem and attributions is covered in this paper. From the research reviewed it is clear that the causes which people assign for failures reflect perceptions of self and of environment which are highly related to self-concept.

The Relationship of Self-Concept to Causal Attributions

Steven H. Shaha

When one experiences a failure or success, one of the first reactions is to attempt to explain the cause. The process of answering the question of why something happened involves the invoking of highly idiosyncratic perceptions of self and environment. This is especially the case when the outcome being interpreted involves a personal failure (Weiner, 1979).

The process of assigning explanatory blame for outcomes which involve us has been discussed under the heading of Attribution Theory. Originating with Heider (1958), recent forms of attribution theory employ several explanatory dimensions for classifying the types of causal attributions formed by people, including (1) Locus of Causality, (2) Stability of the cause over time, and (3) the degree of personal Controllability over the outcome (cf. Weiner, 1979). By inspecting the causes to which people attribute

their failures, one can arrive at a better understanding of the manner in which a given person perceives his or herself and his or her relationship with the world or environment.

The first dimension of interest is Locus of Causality. Built to a large degree on the framework of Rotter's (1966) Locus of Control, this dimension deals with whether the individual perceives the cause of an outcome as being Internal, originating within one's self, or External, originating beyond one's self or from within the environment. Attributions to Internal causes might include explanations based on ability, effort, or mood, all of which are variables from within. Explanations based on External causes might involve task difficulty, luck, or the influence of other's on one's performance.

The second dimension is Stability, meaning the degree to which the perceived cause of an outcome is stable over time. Stability might be explained in terms of chronic (stable over time) versus acute (unstable over time). Attributions to stable cuases might include ability, typical or trait-like effort, and task difficulty, all of which are generally constant over time. Unstable causes might include mood, luck, transitory effects caused by others, or even temporary effort, all of which can fluctuate over time.

The final dimension generally discussed (Weiner, 1979) is Controllability, or the degree to which the failing or

succeeding individual perceives personal control over an event as being related to the outcome. Controllable causes are those over which one has perceived volitional control, including effort, or the receipt of help from others. Uncontrollable causes are those which the person perceives as being beyond his or her reach to influence, such as innate ability, the nature of a task, or sicknesses.

While these three dimensions do not cover all possible attributional explanations one could offer (cf. Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), they offer the groundwork for investigating the nature of the relationship which an individual perceives him or herself having with the environment and with the outcomes of events. Of specific interest in this paper is the degree to which different causal attributions are reflective of self-concept, especially in light of the given dimensions already discussed. Self-concept is best defined as a person's perception of him or herself as formed through one's experiences with the environment and the interpretation of such experiences (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982).

The research presented in this paper is not intended to be comprehensive, nor will it necessarily depend upon the most cited research in the area. Rather, the studies will be referenced for their recency and applicability to attribution theory as it has been tested and reformulated to

better account for the explanations people offer for the perceived causes of personal outcomes. It should also be clarified that the majority of this discussion will tend toward attributions associated with failures, since such experiences are more likely to lead to the formation of causal attributions (Weiner, 1979).

For the sake of clarity, Table 1 is provided below which is designed after a similar table by Weiner (1979). Within the figure are found the three dimensions of causal attributions already presented. Within the cells are found typical or potential explanations which might be associated with the causes for personal outcomes. The focus of this paper will be to explain the extent to which these hypothetical attributions are reflective of self-concept perceptions, as opposed to those which might reflect either neutrality with respect to self-concept, or which might be only situationally reflective of self-concept.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Locus of Causality is associated with the way in which an individual perceives his or her relationship with the

environment. deCharms (1968) utilized a similar construct in discussing the origin-pawn theories, while Steiner (1970) labelled it freedom-constraint. Clearly, if one envisions the cause of outcomes to be outside of him or herself, then the experience of success will meet with only limited enjoyment, while failure might lead to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, or even depression. For these reasons, Weiner (1979) explained that the Locus dimension is the causal classification most closely associated with the esteem-related affects.

Logically, recognizing oneself (Internal Locus) as the cause of events which have a personal effect carries with it interesting messages. For failure events, blaming oneself for the cause of a failure might be indicative of low self-esteem. Johnson (1981) verified that low self-concept was significantly associated with internal attributions for failure. This relationship exists among learning disabled students as well, in that they experience lower self-concept and more internal attributions for their failures than average for their age group when they compare themsleves with normal, nondisabled peers (Bryan & Pearl, 1979; Welch, 1982). Explanations of the data on learning disabled students even seem to indicate that the formation of internal attributions for failure may precede the problem of low self-esteem (Johnson, 1981; Welch, 1982).

The association of self-concept to internal attributions brings to mind the research by Abramson et al. (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). They theorized that an attribution for failure can be internal and not necessarily lead to lower self-esteem. The critical issue, they maintained, was whether relevant others failed on the same task. In other words, if the failure was universal among meaningful others, than the cause of the failure is perceived as being outside of one's self, whether in reality one was to blame or not.

The literature even seems to imply that the Locus of Causality might shift from Internal to External given that the individual perceives that significant others are failing as well. Bryan and Pearl (1979) and Welch (1981) appear to account for lower self-concept among learning disabled children by showing that these subjects were comparing themselves with mainstream children who were succeeding in the same tasks. Children seemed to feel that since normal relevant others were succeeding, then the fault for failure must be within themselves rather than within the task itself or some other factor External to them. The result was lower self-concept and general feelings of inadequacy or incompetence.

The relationship between perception of self in comparison to others, and the perception of the Locus of

Causation, is further supported in research where normal children were placed in classes for the learning disabled in order to monitor changes in achievement and self-esteem (Krampen & Zinsser, 1981). Results showed that self-concept among normal children increased significantly, while the opposite effect was found among the learning disabled students. Apparently, whether one blames oneself for failure or success is indeed highly dependent upon how well relevant other do at the same task.

The dimension of Stability provides the criteria upon which people judge the probability of future performances based on the past. Clearly, a highly stable, unchanging cause of failure will probably lead to future failures since the task or cause is not bound to get easier or more "friendly." On the other hand, a cause perceived as unstable brings encouragement and leaves the door open for potential changes in the future, meaning that today's failure is not immutably determinant of tomorrow's outcome.

Examining the potential attributions associated with Stability will show the relationship that this dimension shares with self-concept. If one were to experience failure at a task because of what he or she perceives to be a fleeting or temporary cause, then no lasting decrement in self-esteem would be expected. Lack of effort, resulting in

failure, is associated with increased performance intensity, not necessarily decreased self-concept (Weiner, 1979). This should apply to temporary sickness or poor moods, as well. It is as though the individual knows that such temporary causes, even if internal, can be overcome and are, therefore, not devastating. The same explanation appears to apply to external, unstable causes of failure, such as luck.

Attributions associated with Stable causes are not so easily explained away. If one tries and tries, and yet cannot seem to succeed at a task, then the cause of failure is perceived as stable. The causal attribution goes from effort, or some other unstable cause, to lack of innate ability or typical effort. In the examples of the learning disabled cited above, subjects appeared to realize that there was little or no probability of them competing and succeeding in relation to relevant others (Bryan & Pearl, 1979).

The relationship between repeated failures and both attributions and self-concept, even among normal students, is a highly documented phenomenon (cf. Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1979; Allmer, 1980; Ames, 1978; Johnson, 1981; Covington & Omelich, 1981). Invariably, researchers have found that successive failures result in ever increasing attributions to lack of ability (an internal, stable cause),

accompanied by ever decreasing self-concept scores. So consistent are the results that the area of Learned Helplessness pivots on this relationship (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1979). However, the findings are not limited alone to failures induced through experimental manipulation, but to repeated failures in academic settings, for example, as well (Johnson, 1981).

Note the interaction between the expectancy (Stability) and esteem (Locus) dimensions. If one were to attribute one's failure to a stable, but external cause, such as a prejudicial teacher or an impossible task, then there is not necessarily a decrement in self-concept. Klein, Fencil, and Seligman (1976) found that even when a task was highly difficult (Stable), if subjects were persuaded to attribute their initial failures to the task (external) rather than to their own incompetence (internal), performance increased significantly.

This suggests that failure in itself is not enough to establish a condition of learned helplessness. Rather, the subject must perceive him or herself (internal) as the cause of the stable failure in order to begin to experience depression, resulting in the performance and self-concept decriments associated with learned helplessness. In addition, the research on the learning disabled supports the conclusion that failure itself is not apparently sufficient

for learned helplessness, but that one must perceive him or herself as the Locus of Causality, or at least as inferior to the norm (cf Bryan & Pearl, 1979).

The interactive effects of Locus and Stability on self-concept have already been discussed in this paper. It appears to be the case that attributions which are reflective of self-esteem threatening conditions involve internal Loci of Causality. Also, the effect of Stability is mediated by Locus of Causality, but only to the extent that the attributed cause of a failure event is perceived as Stable over time. This means that although some threat to self-concept may initially be associated with an unstable, internal attribution, the more lasting damage to self perception when the individual envisions self as the source of the problem, and views the problem as unchanging, remaining a problem over time.

The third dimension of attribution is Controllability. In essence, subjects perceive an outcome as being under their personal control or as being uncontrollable. Weiner (Note 1) interprets Controllability as the dimension of "responsibility." However, accepting personal responsibility for an outcome which ended in failure should theoretically signal a decrement in self-esteem, while the converse would be anticipated if the result were successful. On the other

hand, one would expect opposing relations between failure, success, and responsibility attributions when the cause is perceived as being out of personal control (uncontrollable). These predictions were not borne out in the research reviewed for this paper.

The studies involving learning disabled children generally have shown that successive failures are considered Stable causes and bring about lower self-concept because percipients compare themselves to normal, non-failing children that they consider to be meaningful or relevant others. (Bryan & Pearl, 1979; Krampen & Zinsser, 1981). Note in these circumstances that the condition of learning disability is not really controllable, nor do any of the studies mentioned treat the condition in terms of controllability. It would appear that whether these children can control their mental condition or whether they perceived controllability was not critical to the formation of a poor self-concept.

Another example of the lack of effect due to controllability involves studies dealing with successive failure experiences (Allmer, 1980; Ames, 1978; Johnson, 1981; Covington & Omelich, 1981). Depression, low self-concept, and feelings of helplessness were the biproduct of the attribution of outcomes to stable, internal causes despite controllability or uncontrollability. In the

studies on learned helplessness subjects are customarily placed in situations where they are doomed to fail due to the comparative difficulty of the tasks utilized. Success or failure is not in any way objectively controllable, yet subjects still experience the negative affects mentioned. For these reasons, it appears that even an uncontrollable failure outcome leads to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. As can be seen in Figure 1, mood and effort might both lead to low self-concept with repeated occurrences, while typical effort and ability attributions will almost surely indicate negative self-perceptions.

Summary

In the final analysis, then, it would appear that self-concept and attributions of causation are interdependent to a large extent, especially in failure situations. As has been noted, the most threatening situations arise when the cause of failure is perceived to be personally centered (internal) and stable over time. It would also appear that the presence or absence of controllability over the outcome plays a lesser role in the formation of self-concept.

There may be one final comment which should be made with reference to the apparent lack of effect due to controllability. Since Weiner (1979) associates

controllability with perceptions of personal responsibility, then one would have expected more of a relationship to have unfolded, where for example controllable, personally responsible causes of failure would lead to lower self-concept than if the converse were the case. One might attempt to explain the apparent contradiction in terms of the very nature of controllability itself. Certainly, Weiner (1979) has observed that it is difficult to conceed that there might even be any such thing as a controllable external cause. So, one might argue, controllability may well apply only to internal causes, making the added dimension relatively unnecessary.

While this argument might sound convincing, it is still appears useful to maintain the existence and classificatory validity of the controllability dimension. Note the comparison of teacher expectations versus help from others as causal attributions, for example. Teacher expectations, while relatively stable, are somewhat under the control of the student. The student could, for example, be made aware of how to behave properly in order to reduce the likelihood of this stable, external element. The receiving of help from others during task performance is unstable in that it is relatively unpredictible, while clearly external to the student. Yet, the student has no real control over the availability of the help since the other individual involved might simply choose to default.

The problem of distinguishing between the dimensions may arise from within the subjects themselves. It may be the case that low self-concept individuals perceive all internal causes as being unconquerable, or stable and uncontrollable. Meanwhile, the same logic would make high self-concept individuals perceive all internal causes as under their willful control, or as stable, controllable. While this distinction has not been specifically researched, the data appear to indicate that this may indeed by the problem. In short, while the diferentiability of the dimensions may appear foggy, they remain, nonetheless, distinct dimensions.

Another note concerns other potentially useful dimensions for classifying causal attributions. Abramson et al (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) mention the distinction between Global versus situation Specific attributions. This might be translated into Trait versus State differences in that the dimension addresses the topic of situational generalizability (see Weiner, 1979). Such a distinction is clearly a probable correlate of self-concept, as is well established by data presented in the Abramson et al paper.

The invoking of the distinction between situational attributions as a subset or special case of general attributions is reminiscent of a heirarchical-like

approach. This is also of special interest in considering self-concept, since recent research has clearly established the existence of a heirarchical structure in self-esteem (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). In simple terms, one may have a very high self-concept in a general sense, and a high self-concept in scholastic settings, yet feel quite insecure in mathematics while simultaneously feeling strong in English. This compartmental or situational approach is probably crucial to a clear understanding of attributions, and will undoubtedly become an increasingly active area of research until resolved.

Weiner (1979) also has mentioned a fifth causal dimension labelled Intentionality. Although this is also a highly interesting and potentially useful distinction for categorizing causal attributions, it is not well researched or developed in current literature.

Reference Notes

Note 1. Weiner, B. The emotional consequences of causal ascriptions. Invited address presented at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association, Los Angeles, 1981.

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Table 1

Causal Attributions Associated with

Common Failures and Successes

		Locus of Causality	
		Internal	External
Stable	Controllable	Typical effort	Teacher bias
	Uncontrollable	Innate ability Permanent disabilities	Task parameters
Unstable	Controllable	Immediate effort	Help or influence from others
	Uncontrollable	Moods Temporary illness or disability	Luck